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ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DINT-00
	DOPE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00	EB-00	OIGO-00	FAAE-00	FBIE-00
	UTED-00	VC-00	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	LAB-01
	L-00	VCE-00	AC-01	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OIC-02	OMB-01
	OPIC-01	PA-00	PC-01	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00
	SCT-00	SP-00	STR-00	TEST-00	TRSE-00	USIE-00	EPAE-00
	PMB-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-02	G-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5686
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI
DIA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 001272

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, EAP/EX AND EAP/PD
DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR DRL/IRF, DRL/BA, PRM AND INR/EAP/SEA

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV PREL PINR VM ETMIN HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS GROUPS AVOID CONFRONTATION IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS PROVINCE

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REF: A) HCMC 874, B) HANOI 1250, C) HCMC 658

1.(SBU) SUMMARY: ON A TRIP TO LAM DONG PROVINCE, DPO AND CONOFF VISITED A MAHAYANA BUDDHIST CONVENT, A ZEN BUDDHIST MONASTERY AND THE DALAT CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL TO INVESTIGATE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES IN THIS ETHNICALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE CENTRAL HIGHLAND PROVINCE. VIETNAMESE INDIVIDUALS ARE FREE TO WORSHIP AND PRACTICE THEIR RELIGION OPENLY IN LAM DONG PROVINCE, ACCORDING TO ALL THREE GROUPS. HOWEVER, GOVERNMENT CONTROLS REMAIN ON RELIGIOUS ADMINISTRATION AND ORGANIZATION. MANY BUDDHISTS IN LAM DONG APPEAR TO BE AVOIDING POLITICS ALTOGETHER, AND MAKE A CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY. CATHOLICS IN LAM DONG APPEAR TO BELIEVE THE CHURCH HAS AN APPROPRIATE ROLE TO PLAY IN INFLUENCING POLITICS, BUT THAT ROLE SHOULD BE DISCREET AND NON-CONFRONTATIONAL. PLEASE PROTECT ALL SOURCES ON SENSITIVE COMMENTS. END SUMMARY.

BUDDHIST NUNS FOCUS ON PRAYER NOT POLITICS

2.(SBU) THE "SU NU BUDDHIST CONVENT" IN DALAT IS THE PRIMARY BUDDHIST CONVENT IN LAM DONG PROVINCE. OF THE ROUGHLY 300 BUDDHIST NUNS IN DALAT, 40 RESIDE AT SU NU CONVENT. THE CONVENT IS OPEN TO BUDDHIST WOMEN OF ALL AGES AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE CURRENTLY NO ETHNIC MINORITY NUNS AT THE CONVENT AND ONLY A FEW IN DALAT AS A WHOLE. (NOTE: NUNS THERE INDICATED ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE PROVINCE, AS ELSEWHERE IN VIETNAM, ARE OFTEN EITHER CATHOLIC OR PROTESTANT). UPON ENTRY INTO THE CONVENT, BUDDHIST NUNS UNDERGO RIGOROUS TRAINING IN BUDDHIST TEACHINGS AND

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SCRIPTURE. TYPICALLY, A BUDDHIST NUN REACHES SENIOR RANKS WITHIN THE CHURCH AFTER 8-10 YEARS OF STUDY AND TRAINING. THE CONVENT PAYS ONLY A PORTION OF TOTAL TRAINING COSTS AND RECEIVES NO GOVERNMENT FUNDING OR SUPPORT.

3.(SBU) WHEN ASKED BY CONOFFS ABOUT THE OFFICIAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE UNIFIED BUDDHIST CHURCH OF VIETNAM (UBCV) AND THE VIETNAM BUDDHIST CHURCH (VBC), BUDDHIST NUNS AT THE CONVENT SAID THAT, IN THEIR OPINION, VIETNAMESE BUDDHISTS ARE ALL "BUDDHIST BROTHERS AND SISTERS" AND THAT THEY SEE NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN FOLLOWERS OF THE UBCV AND THE VBC. THEY ADDED THAT THE GVN RECOGNIZES OFFICIALLY ONLY THE VBC, NOTING THAT LEADERS OF THE UBCV DO NOT RECOGNIZE GVN CONTROL OVER THE CHURCH'S ACTIVITIES. THE NUNS OFFERED NO PARTICULAR OPINIONS ABOUT GVN POLICY TOWARDS THE UBCV BUT SAID THAT SOME RELIGIOUS GROUPS, ESPECIALLY PROTESTANTS, HAVE "PROBLEMS" WITH THE GOVERNMENT BECAUSE THEY BECOME "TOO POLITICALLY INVOLVED." THE NUNS SAID LOCAL AUTHORITIES

ROUTINELY REVIEW THEIR PUBLIC ACTIVITIES, FOR EXAMPLE, REQUIRING PRIOR PERMISSION FOR MEETINGS OUTSIDE THE CONVENT. HOWEVER, THEY SAID THERE HAVE NOT BEEN RESTRICTIONS ON THE DAY-TO-DAY WORSHIP OF THEIR FAITH WITHIN THE CONVENT, WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT TO THEM THAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM.

GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS SERVE TO CONTROL CHURCH GROWTH

4.(SBU) CATHOLICS IN LAM DONG PROVINCE ARE FREE TO WORSHIP AND PRACTICE THEIR RELIGION WITHOUT INTERFERENCE. FATHER VO DUC MINH, RECTOR OF DALAT CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL AND CHIEF REPRESENTATIVE OF THE DALAT DIOCESE, TOLD CONOFFS THAT A
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TOTAL OF ABOUT 500 VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS ATTEND THE TWO MASSES HELD AT THE CATHEDRAL DAILY, WHILE A TOTAL OF ABOUT 5000 ATTEND THE FIVE MASSES HELD EVERY SUNDAY. HE CLAIMED THERE ARE ROUGHLY 250,000 CATHOLICS IN THE PROVINCE, ABOUT 25 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF ABOUT 1.2 MILLION. HE SAID MOST ETHNIC MINORITIES IN LAM DONG PROVINCE (OUT OF A TOTAL MINORITY POPULATION ESTIMATED AT 125,000) ARE CATHOLIC.

5.(SBU) FATHER MINH SAID CATHOLIC CHILDREN, BOTH VIETNAMESE AND ETHNIC MINORITY, CAN LEARN THE CATHOLIC FAITH AND ARE FREE TO STUDY THE BIBLE. HE EXPLAINED THERE IS VERY LITTLE, IF ANY, GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE IN THE DAY-TO-DAY WORSHIP OR RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES OF ORDINARY CATHOLIC CITIZENS. HE ALSO SAID THERE IS LITTLE DISCRIMINATION IN DAILY LIFE FOR ORDINARY BELIEVERS, ALTHOUGH CATHOLICS DO NOT USUALLY REACH THE VERY TOP LEVELS, WHICH ARE CONTROLLED BY THE COMMUNIST PARTY. MINH SAID THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE GVN ARE ADMINISTRATIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL IN NATURE. FOR EXAMPLE, THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN DALAT (AS ELSEWHERE IN VIETNAM) CONTROLS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SEMINARIANS AND THE NUMBER OF NEW PRIESTS THAT CAN BE ORDAINED. ALSO, THE GOVERNMENT IMPOSES RESTRICTIONS ON THE MOVEMENT OF CLERGY, APPOINTMENT OF BISHOPS AND OTHER ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF THE CHURCH. ACCORDING TO FATHER MINH, THESE ARE SMALL "ANNOYANCES" BUT THEY ADD UP OVER TIME LIKE "DROPS OF WATER" AND SERVE TO RESTRAIN THE CHURCH'S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.

LAM DONG CATHOLIC CHURCH "DISCREET" IN ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

6.(SBU) LAM DONG PROVINCE AVOIDED THE ETHNIC MINORITY DISTURBANCES THAT TOOK PLACE EARLIER THIS YEAR IN DAKLAK AND GIA LAI PROVINCES (REFTEL A), ALSO IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS. FATHER MINH SAID THIS WAS, IN PART, DUE TO THE MORE ACTIVE EFFORTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LAM DONG TO ASSIST ETHNIC MINORITIES. HE SAID CATHOLIC CLERGY IN LAM DONG VISIT ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES REGULARLY BUT "DISCREETLY" TO PREACH THEIR FAITH AND PERFORM CATHOLIC SERVICES. HE ALSO SAID THAT THE LAM DONG CATHOLIC CHURCH IS MORE COOPERATIVE AND LESS "ANTAGONISTIC" IN ITS DEALINGS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAN THE CHURCH IN OTHER PROVINCES, ALTHOUGH HE STRESSED HE DID NOT WANT TO CRITICIZE THE ACTIVITIES OF VIETNAMESE CHURCH LEADERS ELSEWHERE. HE SAID THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ADVOCATES REFORMS IN LAM DONG, BUT DOES SO IN A NON-CONFRONTATIONAL MANNER, AND THERE HAS BEEN GRADUAL PROGRESS WITH THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ON A VARIETY OF ISSUES (SUCH AS THE APPOINTMENT OF BISHOPS).

7.(SBU) FATHER MINH CONTRASTED THIS A BIT WITH THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY, WHICH HE FINDS MORE CONFRONTATIONAL. HE MENTIONED THAT MANY PROTESTANT PASTORS AND LAY PEOPLE LEFT VIETNAM AFTER 1975, WHILE MOST CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND CLERGY IN LAM DONG REMAINED TO SERVE THEIR COMMUNITIES. THIS LEFT MANY PROTESTANT BELIEVERS "LIKE LOST SHEEP WITHOUT
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A SHEPHERD," HE CLAIMED, AND THEY HAVE OVER TIME TAKEN A MORE ACTIVIST APPROACH TOWARDS DIFFERENCES WITH THE GOVERNMENT. MINH, SPEAKING PERSONALLY, SAID HE FINDS THIS STYLE COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE. HE ADDED, HOWEVER, THAT IT IS VERY HARD NOT TO BE ANGRY WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN VIEW OF THE SERIOUS SUFFERING UNDERGONE BY MANY CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS IN THE PERIOD AFTER 1975, NOTING THE SITUATION HAD IMPROVED SIGNIFICANTLY BY THE EARLY 1990'S.

8.(SBU) NOTE: WHILE FATHER MINH AND, IN A SEPARATE CONVERSATION, THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT BOTH TAKE CREDIT FOR THE LACK OF ETHNIC MINORITY PROTESTS IN LAM DONG EARLIER THIS YEAR, THE COMPLEX SITUATION FACING ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE PROVINCE DEFIES SIMPLE POLITICAL OR RELIGIOUS EXPLANATIONS. AS NOTED IN REF A, THE ISSUES SURROUNDING CENTRAL HIGHLANDS' UNREST INCLUDE A WIDE VARIETY OF FACTORS, INTER ALIA, MIGRATION, LAND DISPUTES, DISCRIMINATION, ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES, RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES, EDUCATION ISSUES AND OUTSIDE INFLUENCES. FATHER MINH EMPHASIZES THE CHURCH'S EFFORTS AT QUIET DIPLOMACY. PROVINCIAL AUTHORITIES

STRESS THEIR ONGOING COMMITMENT TO EDUCATIONAL AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES. BOTH ARE PROBABLY PART OF THE PUZZLE, BUT EVEN TAKEN TOGETHER THEY DO NOT SEEM ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN WHY LAM DONG HAS BEEN DIFFERENT FROM OTHER CENTRAL HIGHLAND PROVINCES. END NOTE.

WEALTHY ZEN MONASTERY WITH VISIBLE "VIET-KIEU" CONNECTIONS

9.(SBU) THE DALAT "TRUC LAM ZEN INSTITUTION" WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1994 ABOUT 6 KM FROM DALAT CITY AND NOW REPRESENTS THE UNCLASSIFIED

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LARGEST ZEN COMMUNITY IN VIETNAM (A MINORITY OF BUDDHISTS IN VIETNAM PRACTICE ZEN ALTHOUGH CONOFFS COULD NOT OBTAIN SPECIFIC FIGURES). MASTER THICH THANH TU, CHIEF OF THE ZEN INSTITUTE, HAS ESTABLISHED NINE OTHER ZEN MEDITATION CENTERS THROUGHOUT VIETNAM. ONE HUNDRED FIFTY ZEN BUDDHISTS, OF WHICH EIGHTY ARE MEN, RESIDE AND PRACTICE AT THE INSTITUTE NEAR DALAT. THE INSTITUTE ALSO TEACHES FOLLOWERS AND STUDENTS ZEN MEDITATION AND PHILOSOPHY. VISITORS, INCLUDING FOREIGNERS, ARE ALLOWED TO STUDY AT THE INSTITUTE, BUT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROHIBITS FOREIGNERS FROM SPENDING THE NIGHT ON INSTITUTE GROUNDS. FOREIGNERS MUST RETURN TO DALAT AFTER BUSINESS HOURS ALTHOUGH THEY CAN VISIT THE INSTITUTE AS OFTEN AS THEY LIKE.

10.(SBU) THE INSTITUTE RECEIVES NO GOVERNMENT FUNDING AND ALL FUNDS ARE RAISED THROUGH PRIVATE DONATIONS BOTH DOMESTICALLY AND ABROAD. THE NAMES OF PRIVATE DONORS THAT CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE INSTITUTE ARE PAINTED ON CONCRETE BENCHES, WHICH DOT THE INSTITUTE'S MANICURED GROUNDS. CONOFFS NOTICED THAT MOST OF THESE BENCHES BEAR THE NAMES OF AMERICAN "VIET-KIEU" (OVERSEAS VIETNAMESE) DONORS. CONOFFS WERE TOLD MASTER THICH THANH TU WAS VISITING THE INSTITUTE'S SAN DIEGO BRANCH (DAI DAC MONASTERY). ASKED ABOUT GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS, ONE OF THE MONKS INDICATED ZEN BUDDHISTS ARE FREE TO WORSHIP THEIR RELIGION AND ARE NOT RESTRICTED BY THE GOVERNMENT, UNLESS THEY ARE "INVOLVED IN POLITICS." HE IMPLIED SUCH ACTIVISM WAS NOT THE ROLE OF THE BUDDHIST CHURCH IN LAM DONG.

COMMENT

11.(SBU) IT IS DIFFICULT TO GENERALIZE FROM THE HANDFUL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS WE MET IN DALAT. THE BUDDHISTS WE CONTACTED IN LAM DONG APPEAR TO BE TAKING A HANDS-OFF APPROACH TO POLITICS BY FOCUSING PRIMARILY ON PRACTICING THEIR FAITH AND AVOIDING DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL ACTIVITIES. FATHER MINH SEES A CLEAR ROLE FOR THE CHURCH IN INFLUENCING GRADUAL REFORM THROUGH DISCREET AND NON-CONFRONTATIONAL EFFORTS. A COMMON THEME HERE -- WE HAVE ALSO HEARD ELSEWHERE -- IS ONE OF RELATIVE FREEDOM FOR RELIGIOUS WORSHIP AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL. RESTRICTIONS OCCUR AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL AND INCREASE AS THE GVN COMES TO VIEW RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AS MORE ORGANIZED, MORE PUBLIC AND ESPECIALLY MORE POLITICAL.

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